

On the Emotional Footprint in Things and Places¹

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Objects, by definition, usually are considered inanimate and inert: just matter, form, colour and function, which do not contain emotions even if they can elicit them. In themselves, they carry neither joy nor pain. Our glance tells us that a hammer is just a hammer, a pencil is graphite and wood and a dress is cloth, cut and sewn. Nobody, I think, harbours any doubt that this is so and the material and quantitative knowledge of things that is the basis of science education taught at all levels of school introduced us at a young age to this way of thinking. Anyone who would claim that a hammer or a dress carries emotions – let alone soul – would easily be taken for a madman or a joker, and his words would be seen as expressions of madness, nonsense or romanticism.

Maybe this is so, but – to propose an example – in a toy put together by a child in South-East Asia, tied to a sweatshop assembly line in a situation of distress and constriction, a toy made for the distraction and

enjoyment of her western peers, does nothing really remain of that pain and constriction? Not even a glimmer, an emotional footprint? Can what is born in pain really offer distraction and fun? Let me ask once more: can this toy, built by children forced to work in conditions that are unacceptable to us, bring happiness to the children of the richest countries without carrying any trace of that pain and exploitation?

Again: what kind of light can shine from the diamonds mined in South Africa under violent conditions, often by children who can most easily squeeze into the narrow mine-shafts? Is there a relationship between the soulless, mass-produced objects and the progressive depletion of our being, emptier and emptier and more and more encased in a polished shell as it is (and I speak of us who, in our turn, multiply images and poses, our behaviour increasingly serial, like Andy Warhol photos)?³ Is there really any appreciable difference between the table crafted by my local carpenter and the one – presumably identical – produced by Ikea and cloned for the whole world? I think that from this point of view, quite apart from a sociological or economical or humanitarian position⁴, the mass production of goods that is sweeping away craftsmanship and the relocation of this production to areas where labour is less protected might encourage us to rethink our

relationship with the objects we encounter and use in everyday life. In Latin, the verb *ponderare*, "to think" is "to weigh": can we "weigh" what surrounds us?

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato suggests, indicating the metaphysical space of ideas – to which everything conforms, as a double, translating the essence into existence – that objects are not as inert and without that intimate ontological nature as centuries of materialistic training have led us to think (with heavy repercussions on our sensitivity). And there is ample literature on the soul of things, the vital spirit with which matter is imbued in the animistic worldview, wherein objects become the home of the ancestors, as in the case of the *sumange* in Malaysia or the *semangat*, its Indonesian analogue⁵.

But it is not about this that I wish to talk – neither the reflection of the archetype in the phenomenal world nor the animistic perspective on the world – but something very different: something similar to sled tracks in the snow, or the fossil cast of the trilobite in sandstone, or the mysterious, devastating molecules of suffering left in the air by the passage of animals heading for the slaughterhouse⁶, something perhaps analogous with the hypothesis put forward by Jacques Benveniste in 1988 and, in recent years, by Luc Montagnier, on the possibility that water keeps track of the elements with which it has come into contact⁷; or, again, something similar to the memory

of the past of which we meet the tracks in our collective dreams⁸.

Is it possible that matter in general, like water in the theory proposed by Jacques Benveniste and, later, Luc Montagnier, retains a fingerprint, an *emotional* fingerprint, of the manner and the conditions in which it was produced, processed and used?

The idea of an emotional charge present in things has not been successful in the history of thought as it has flourished in our West; perhaps this idea needs a level of sensitivity that has yet to be born. Meanwhile there is a first glimpse of the theme in the pages of Freya Mathews, who reflected on the objects “that have served as perennial instruments of torment in our lives – for example, the father’s strap hanging on the nail behind the door; the barbwire fence surrounding the compound; the bed of the unhappy, abusive marriage”⁹. In the panpsychist view she proposed in *Reinhabiting Reality*, all objects, both natural and manmade, even though they may be damaging or harmful, by the mere fact of existence, have a place in our lives and bring with them traces of feelings and memories and this is enough for them not to be considered completely separate from us or indifferent to our welfare.

To treat whatever exists, whether living or non-living, animated or inert, with care, with love, carries

its spirit along and creates resonances that do not disappear or become diluted over time and do not fade with increasing distance. And this attitude can vibrate chords in our choices and allow us to decide whether to produce and build things with care or with indifference, whether to surround ourselves with objects that testify to and communicate creativity and harmony or coercion and exploitation.

In relation to people, the idea of the emotional footprint is easily understood. It is what constitutes the strongest and most vital feelings in the mind and body; is what echoes from trauma, from dreams and fantasies when they have leave an impact in the depths of our being; it is what – after a bad fright or awesome image – could be read in the shape and appearance of the newborn, as was accepted in the scientific world until the nineteenth century, and is still known today among the people who know that images penetrate the mind and impress their imprints, guide thoughts and passions, arouse emotions and that the most intense emotions or violence experienced by mothers during pregnancy can lead to fatal consequences for the child in the womb¹⁰. Ethical studies within the health professions and neuroscience begin to talk of the footprint that can be left in the synapses of our neurons¹¹, but we can also add that the same emotional traces form a central pillar in the construction of the

psychotherapeutic relationship. In this connection, we can glimpse the traces of the trauma in the psyche, but never the objective footprint. The traces of trauma are the means by which the patient and the analyst have to try to reconstruct the forgotten, traumatic past¹².

The emotional footprint at work deep inside us is expressed at the thresholds where we come into contact with the world; so our face, our wrinkles, but also our behavior can be read as the diary of the life we have known: a handshake recounts and reveals more than a confession. Seen from this perspective, suffering speaks the language of the violence that caused it; and by the suffering that we feel and that we also inflict, we express and bear witness to the violence we have known and that has poisoned us and which surrounds us: fear and aggression bear witness to it. And all that violence and suffering, already so difficult to grasp consciously in other people (were this not so, I like to believe that we would show much greater attention and respect in our relationships than is currently the case), how much more difficult is it to see in animals, plants, and – I push myself to the limits of what can be said – in objects? It is increasingly difficult because our hearts are no longer capable of listening to the world that speaks to us.

So when we speak of objects, the self evidence of

the matter, already frail with reference to people, shinks to vanishing point . In the absence of such evidence, the question remains whether there is any difference between an object manufactured with a certain respect for the creativity and personality of the worker and for a fair wage and a similar object produced in a climate of coercion, anonymity and exploitation, which is independent of our own individual sensitivity and of the information which we have about them. We can assume that, to an extent unknown to us, matter itself is somehow "alive", and not merely mutable – and it is certainly mutable for it is subject to erosion, decline and decay – but alive, although inert and unable to move, and somehow manages to hold and bear witness to the emotions of those with whom it came into contact, those who produced it.

These are not just rhetorical questions, because the reflections behind them are not connected to social policies or to the ethics of relationships (in that case, I love to imagine that the response would be shared without too much trepidation) but rather to the ontological aspect of things, their intimate nature, the vibration that things send forth apart from their appearance.

I am aware that in the context of ethics and before the question of the moral legitimacy of choice in the face of suffering, this theme is a borderline enquiry.

In order to come closer to the idea of the emotional footprint imprinted in what is inert, I would like to mention the same footprint, but with reference to places, assuming that this perception is closer to our common experience and, therefore, more easily communicable.

A place that has known an exceptional measure of suffering, suffering that was not to be borne with a light heart without taking refuge in desensitization or psychosis, is saturated in that suffering like a sponge full of water or the smoker's clothes impregnated with smoke, or like the insult of which the language of those who talk down to people is redolent¹³.

I suppose that this is the unspoken reason – and not only for the insult to memory – why we cannot with impunity build an amusement park in Auschwitz or make a nightclub in the Ardeatine caves. If we did not assume the existence of an emotional footprint in things that leads us to *feel for matter*, only indignation or brief memory would be there to prevent such steps. And memory is very short, if you look at how nowadays the places where Napoleonic massacres happened are seen as entertainment parks or places of touristic interest, and how we, like children at a carnival, organise mock reconstructions of battles, ignoring or forgetting that those places were the

scenes of a huge slaughter over a frenzy for empire that led to a death toll in Europe comparable to the Armenian genocide or the Stalin purges. The memory is slight, manipulable and ephemeral: sometimes it lasts no longer than the memory of a dream upon waking, sometimes it lasts longer but only at the price of making a caricature of what we would like to pass on, just like the memories of our youth, corrected and purified by time.

Or else only the emotion, the anger stays with us, which, through a place or an object, makes plain the personal stance on right and wrong. But as long as it is personal and not shared as a common heritage and collectively reflected on over time, the position on right and wrong is ephemeral, as ephemeral as memory, as the subjective evaluation of what is good, true and beautiful. When emotions are not grafted onto the lasting and common stock of understanding, they follow the ebb and flow of time, the fashions of the moment, and have no more weight than an opinion, no more strength than a point of view.

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- ¹ Translation revised by Etain Addey.
- ² Massimo Angelini holds a doctorate in Urban and Rural History. His book, *Le Meraviglie della Generazione: Voglie Materne, Nascite Straordinaire e Imposture nella Storia della Cultura e del Pensiero Medico (secoli XV-XIX)*, was published by Mimesis in Milano, Italy in 2012.
- ³ With reference to the media and entertainment society, Marc Fumaroli calls this seriality “tautology”, labelling it the rudderless hammer of persuasive marketing cacophony, a shuddering mechanism like a machine gun, which has become the winning technique in every contemporary military strategy. See Marc Fumaroli (2009), *Paris - New York et retour*, Fayard, Paris.
- ⁴ The destructive side effects of serial production on conviviality are analysed by Ivan Illich (1978), *Towards a History of Needs*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- ⁵ Kirk E. Endicott (1970), *An Analysis of Malay Magic*, University Press, Oxford: 47; M. Cameron Hay (2004) *Remembering to live. Illness at the Intersection of Anxiety and Knowledge in Rural Indonesia*, University of Michigan Press, pp 143-144.
- ⁶ Susanna Tamaro (2011), *L'Isola che c'è. Il nostro Tempo, l'Italia, i nostri Figli*, Lindau, Torino, p.131-132.
- ⁷ Jacques Benveniste (2005), *Ma Vérité sur la 'Mémoire de l'Eau'*, A. Michel, Paris; Luc Montagnier et al. (2011), 'DNA Waves and Water', *Journal of Physics, Conferences Series*, 306, 012007.
- ⁸ On collective dreams: Helmut Hark (1985), *Der Traum als Gottes Vergessene Sprache*, Walter Verlag, Olten. Hark's positions explicitly refer to the laying down of

memory in the collective unconscious as theorised by Carl G. Jung in Carl G. Jung, *Septem Sermones ad Muortos*, in *Liber Novus (The Red Book)*, Philemon Foundation and W.W. Norton & Co. 2009.

- ⁹ Freya Mathews (2005), *Reinhabiting reality. Towards a recovery of culture*, SUNY, Albany, p. 210 (note 12).
- ¹⁰ Massimo Angelini (2012), *Le Meraviglie della Generazione: Voglie Materne, Nascite Straordinaire e Imposture nella Storia della Cultura e del Pensiero Medico (secoli XV-XIX)*, Mimesis, Milano.
- ¹¹ Roberto Alfieri (2010), *L'Edificazione della Coscienza: apporti delle Neuroscienze per un Servizio Sanitario Eticamente Fondato*, 'Riflessioni Sistemiche', 3: 111-121, p. 117.
- ¹² Alberto Luchetti (2009), *Il Trauma e la sua Impronta. Per una Interpunzione*, in Aa. Vv., *L'impronta del trauma. Sui limiti della simbolizzazione*, ed. Centro Psicoanalitico di Roma, F. Angeli, Milano.
- ¹³ We know that by using allusion, one can be vulgar and insulting without ever using the actual words of insult or injury.